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ABSTRACT

The cloze test requires a student to fill gaps in a text with appropriate words where every nth word is deleted. The cloze procedure forms a test of a reader's ability to predict, on the basis of context, what word will occur. Test marking may be narrow, in which only the exact word omitted is counted as correct, or broad, where any acceptable word is correct. In addition to general reading and language skills, the cloze test requires the following abilities: (1) knowledge of vocabulary; (2) knowledge of collocation and colligation; (3) attention to nearer and farther context; and (4) flexibility as to word and context interchangeability. Two cloze test fragments illustrate how these abilities are called into play.
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SOME OBSERVATIONS ON CLOZE TESTS

The cloze test can be described very simply: the student is required to fill the gaps appropriately where every nth word is deleted in a text. First devised by Wilson Taylor for determining the readability of texts, the "cloze" procedure has been, so to speak, inverted to form a test of a reader's ability to predict what word will occur on the basis of the context. (The predictability is sometimes called "expectancy", although this term is not quite appropriate to a written text, where the following as well as the preceding context may be used to determine what word has been omitted; "expectedness" might be preferred, but on the other hand "expectancy", like prediction, is used without regard to time-order in mathematical discourse.)

There are two methods of marking a cloze test. The first is called "narrow": only the exact word omitted is counted as correct; the second is called "broad": any acceptable word is counted as correct. Neither type of marking can be done by the optical reader and computer system used here at present to mark multiple-choice tests in university entrance examinations. The narrow marking however is a quite objective procedure: it does not vary with the person doing it. Broad marking may so vary, and must be standardised in a group test.

When compared with other language tests, the cloze test appears to be a good one. With narrow marking, it shows a correlation of .76 with listening comprehension (multiple-choice) and .69 with dictation, which tests, together with structures, vocabulary and reading comprehension, form the five subtests in the TOEFL battery of tests. The above correlations are higher than any found between the subtests of the TOEFL battery; or between any one subtest and the rest of the subtests, excepting only listening comprehension. (See "Cloze, Dictation and the TOEFL", J.W. Oller Jr., Patricia Irvine and Parvin Atai in Language Learning, Volume 24, no. 2, 1974.)

Statistically, language tests measure variation in language ability through active or passive use of written or spoken language. This does not mean that the tests measure the "subskills", as they are nowadays called, of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The form (sometimes called "the mechanics") of both multiple-choice and cloze tests requires the exercise of abilities rather unlike those used in listening etc. in everyday life.

The usual multiple-choice test called "reading comprehension" for example, would be more exactly characterised as a test of "academic reading ability" (defined as reading for information and making inferences from what is read), or, in a roughly equivalent way, as a test of the ability to use textual matter in self-instruction. Correspondingly, the cloze test would be usefully understood as a test of the ability to study a text in detail, as in critical reading or proof-reading. The point here is, that when we read in everyday life, we usually do not pose ourselves, or have posed to us, a number of questions, equally spread over the text, or, similarly, a number of statements with which to agree or disagree; neither do we, in our everyday reading, notice or utilise every nth word. The cloze test and the multiple choice test therefore cannot be considered as requiring only those abilities used in everyday reading, even though they predict these abilities rather well. Since it is generally agreed that the abilities needed to perform in a test do, and perhaps should, influence the teaching given (whether we wish it or not), the question should be asked, "What are the abilities required to perform in the cloze test?" What we propose to do in the remaining part of this article is to provide some ad hoc answers to this question, by means of examples, interpreting "abilities" in a general unsystematic sense. We shall suggest four abilities - additions or modifications to these are naturally to be expected. They are: 1. Knowledge of vocabulary 2. Knowledge of collocation and colligation 3. Attention to nearer and farther context 4. Flexibility as to word and context interchangeability.

EXAMPLES

Below are two fragments of possible cloze tests, based on the same text. The first has gaps five words apart, the second, six words apart; the first begins at word 6, the second at word 0.

(1) Earlier this year, British Council ---- expert Peter Roe visited Finland ---- strongly advocated the use of ---- cloze test of language skill. ---- talk to a workgroup of ---- Conference of English Departments is ---- in the C.E.D. report 1975

(2) ---- this year, British Council Testing expert ---- Roe visited Finland and strongly advocated ---- use of this test of language ----. His talk to a workgroup of ---- Conference of English Departments is summarised ---- in the C.E.D. report 1975.

We will illustrate the four above-mentioned abilities from these two fragments.

1. Knowledge of vocabulary. This is rather specific to filling the last gap in (1). "Reported" or "written" would be relatively unacceptable compared with "summarised". "Included" would be only fairly acceptable.

2. Knowledge of collocation. The tendency for certain words to occur together is called "collocation". "Earlier", the exact word for the first gap in (2) collocates with "year". The requirement for certain words to occur together is strictly called "colligation". The rules of adjective order rule out "well-known" in the second gap in (2), although "well-known" may easily collocate with a personal name. Textual cohesion rules (thus colligation) will rule out "there" in the last gap in (2) - a place phrase follows, and "there" would duplicate the reference.

3. Attention to nearer and farther context. "During" in the first gap in (2) would be wholly acceptable on the basis of nearer context. "Visited" however is likely to specify a definite time, which "during" does not. Compare "has visited", "has been in/visiting". Note also that "strongly advocated" has the same tense as "visited". This much context is needed to show that "earlier" is more acceptable than "during".

4. Flexibility as to word and context interchangeability. In the third gap in (1) there is a choice between "a", "the" and certain other words. In another test based on this text, the word "the" before "use" could have been omitted, and the word "the" before "cloze" included. The interdependence of the articles in these two positions is shown by the fact that "the" + "the", "the" + "a", "a" + "the", and "a" + "a" are acceptable decreasingly in that order. The possibility certainly exists that the word use to fill one gap would affect the choice of word to fill another gap. Word and context interchange. An example of this does not occur however in the above fragments, as far as we can judge.

The cloze test, then, it is suggested, requires for its performance certain "abilities", in a non-technical sense of that word, which are not necessarily implied in the language skills, such as reading and listening, with which performance in the cloze test is known to correlate. Four of these "abilities" have been discussed above: they are, attention to nearer and farther context; knowledge of likely collocations and colligations (i.e. of words which, for one reason or another, are likely to occur in the same context), flexibility in treating a (perhaps hypothetical) word inserted in a gap in the text as context for further predictions, and knowledge of vocabulary.